



# THE THREAT OF IS (ISLAMIC STATE) IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Terrorism and extremism is not a new phenomenon to Southeast Asian countries. Dangerous radical groups such as Abu Sayyaf and Jammah Islamyah have carried out dozens of deadly attacks in the region. Some of these local terrorist groups are suspected to have links with Al Qaeda. The rise of ISIS on the other hand has raised new security concerns in Southeast Asia, particularly for those countries with majority-Muslim populations. According to official reports more than 200 people from Southeast Asian have already joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq.*

*Based on the concept of a world-wide Caliphate, which is central to its doctrine, ISIS has started to extend its influence to other parts of the world, including Southeast Asia. Considering ISIS is much more organized and sophisticated than Al Qaeda, there is little doubt of ISIS' possible appeal in Southeast Asia. The current article strives to examine the presence and estimate the threat of ISIS in the region with a focus on Malaysia and Indonesia.*

## Introduction

Radicalism and terrorism are not new phenomenon in Southeast Asia as jihadist groups have long had a foothold in this region. In fact, Southeast Asia has much experience with dangerous terrorist groups such as Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines and Jammah Islamyah in Indonesia. In 1995, Abu Sayyaf killed more than 50 people in the southern Philippines. In 2002 and 2005, The Bali terrorist attacks by Jammah Islamyah caused more than 200 casualties. These atrocities and dozens of other Al Qaeda-alleged terrorist attacks clearly demonstrate that the region is prone to the influence of international terrorism. The Bush administration even labeled the region as the “Second Front” in the war on terror. Although ASEAN had already designated international terrorism a serious security threat in Southeast Asia, the Bali bombings highlighted terrorism as the top concern in the region.<sup>[1]</sup> As a result, the 2007 ASEAN summit, showed its members responding to terrorism seriously for the first time.<sup>[2]</sup>

This article strives to examine the influence of ISIS in Southeast Asia to estimate the threat of this new generation of terrorism poses to the region. The focus of this research is on Malaysia and Indonesia, two majority-Muslim countries. The research method utilized is based on content analysis of online ISIS materials including websites and social media.

## The Rise of ISIS

ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in its current form originated in 1999 as Jamaat Tawih Wal Jihad (JTWJ) under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the group was involved in the Iraqi insurgency and conducted suicide attacks against civilians and Iraqi government officials. In 2004, JTWJ pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda and soon assumed the unofficial name of Al-Qaeda-Iraq (AQI). AQI merged with other Iraqi insurgent groups to form the Mujahedeen Shura Council (MSC). Roughly seven months later MSC declared the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS) under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, claiming Baqubah as its capital city. In 2010, the then leader of ISIS, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, was killed in an American-led attack and was replaced by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Baghdadi began a marked shift in the group’s strategy and started to use the internet and social media in order to appeal to potential supporters of ISIS across the world. The “Breaking the Walls” propaganda campaign released by ISIS is one of their first documented attempts at implementing its new web-savvy strategy.<sup>[3]</sup>

In June 2014, ISIS proclaimed the establishment of its worldwide caliphate (IS) under the leadership of Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi.<sup>[4]</sup> The establishment of this worldwide caliphate marked a noticeable shift in the group’s strategy from the regional to the international stage. As caliph, Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi demanded the allegiance of all Muslims around the world. The announcement of this caliphate directly

questioned the legality and sovereignty of many world governments.

## ISIS in Southeast Asia

Currently several extremist groups in Southeast Asia have pledged allegiance to ISIS. Furthermore, up to 200 Indonesian, 50 Malaysian, 100 Filipinos and even a handful of Singaporeans have joined the ISIS mujahedeen in Iraq and Syria.[5]

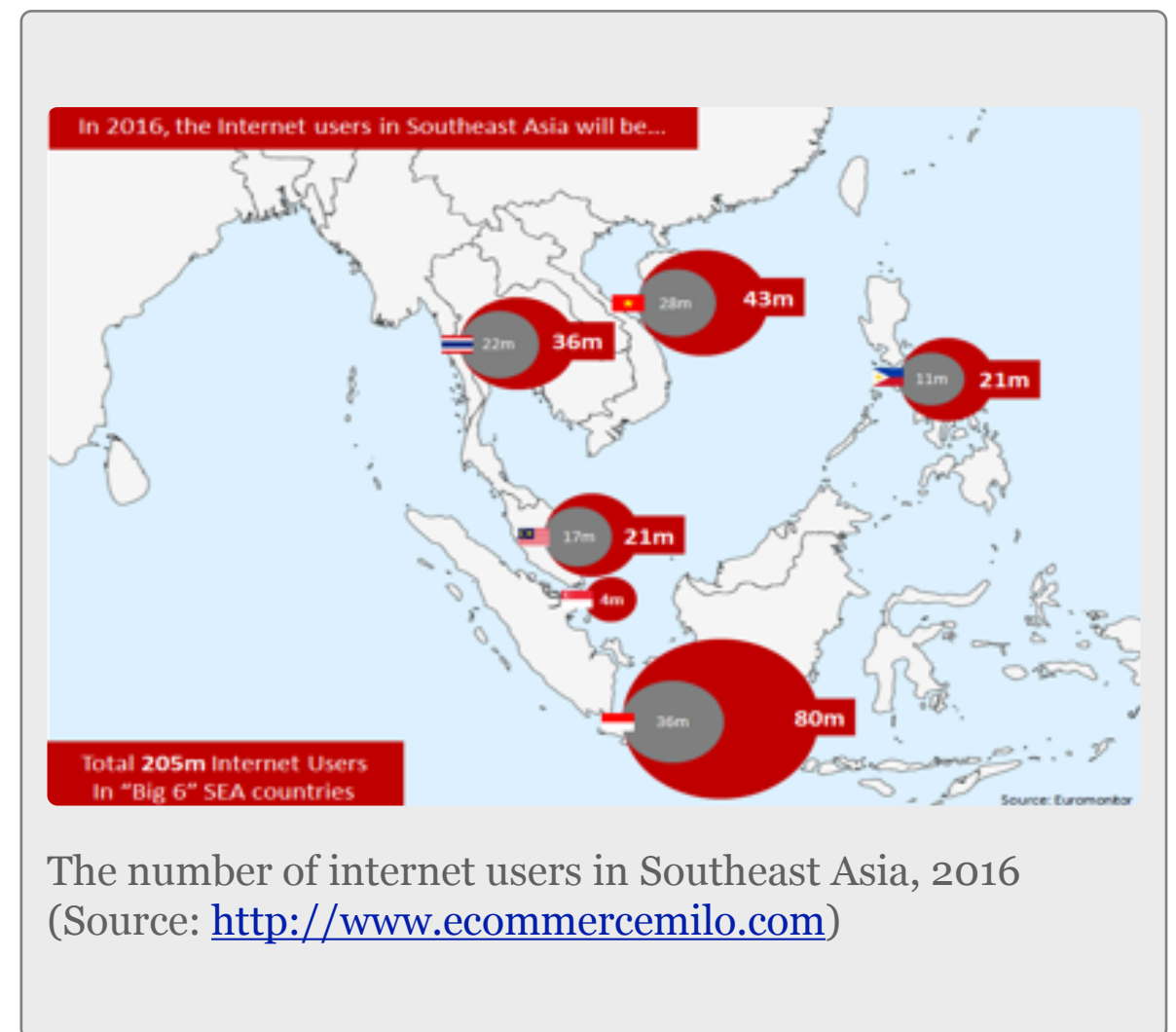
In fact, the rise of ISIS represents a new chapter of radicalism and extremism in Southeast Asia, and the region's governments are acutely aware that ISIS has the potential to spawn a new generation of terrorism in the region. The similarities between the former challenge of Al Qaeda and the current threat of ISIS have increased awareness among Southeast Asian authorities over terrorism's devastating legacy in the region.

In comparison with Al Qaeda, ISIS shows a higher level of organization and sophistication which may make its ideology more appealing in Southeast Asia.

Three factors undergird the charm of ISIS in Southeast Asia: social media, returning jihadists, and the world wide caliphate.

## 1- Social Media

New information and communication technologies (ICT) not only have revolutionized the world the average person. They also play an important role in enabling connections

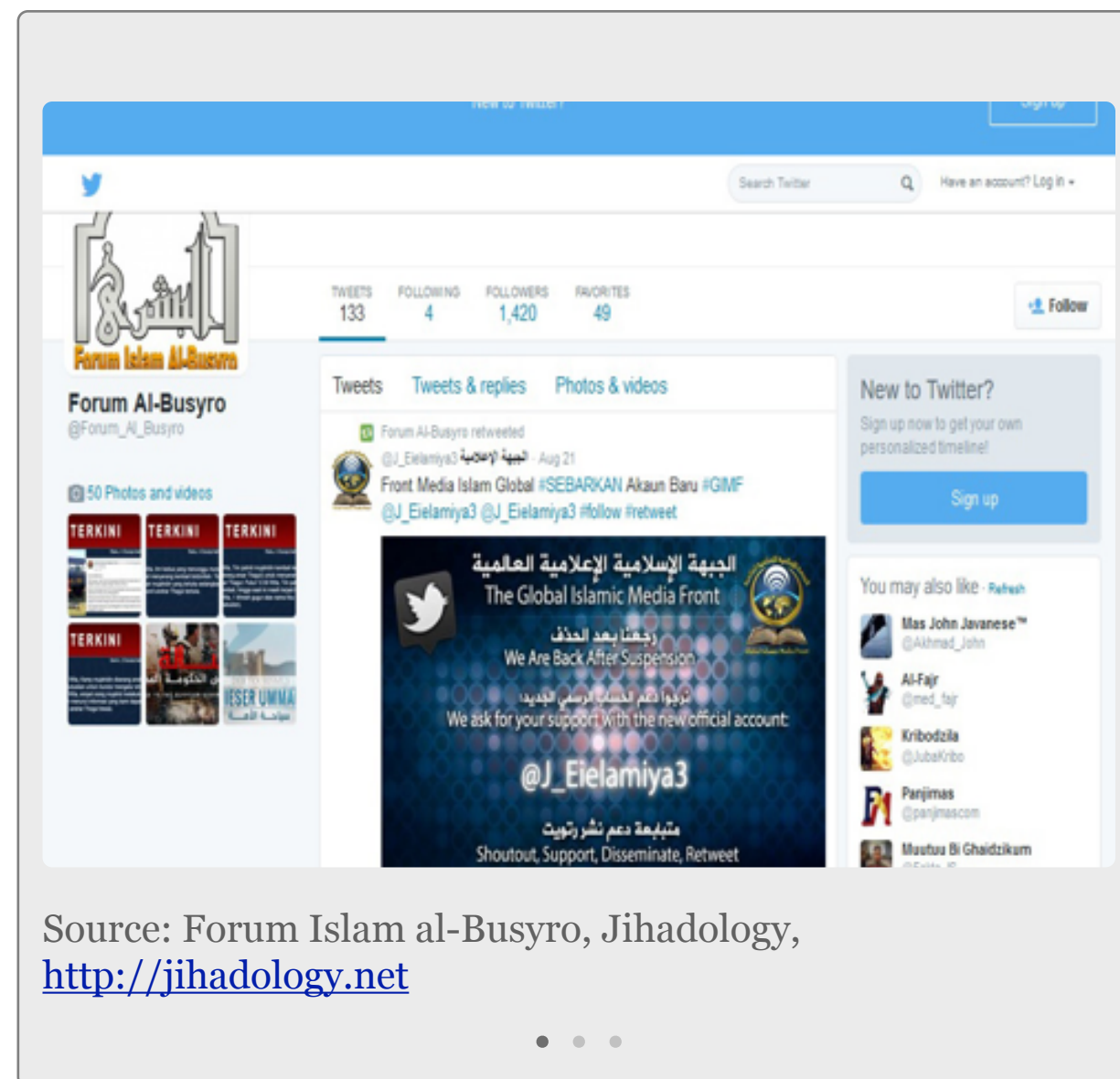


among terrorists. ISIS represents a new generation of terrorism in its exploitation of these new technologies to spread its violent ideology across the globe, including to Southeast Asia. Their efforts have already conquered a great swathe of social media space through deploying sophisticated

web-based strategies to promote their extremist agenda. ISIS' social media presence has easily made the group more appealing than Al-Qaeda. The vastly popular social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have proven to be the perfect tools for ISIS to establish its virtual Caliphate (e-Caliphate) and to attract e-citizens (e-Ommah). Thanks to new ICT, terrorist groups such as ISIS have waged informational warfare and have exploited the internet to inspire potential supporters across the globe. In this context, ISIS tries to demonize its enemies and to legitimize their use of violence to convince its audience that they have no choice other than to resort to violence. To shift the responsibility for their violent acts onto their enemy ISIS jihadists usually characterize their enemies as anti-religious demons who are suppressing Muslims and damaging their dignity.

To analyze the influence of ISIS in Southeast Asia one must consider that the digital landscape in of the region is expanding rapidly .Younger generations spend most of their time on social media and blogs and are inevitably exposed to online extremist propaganda. The faster the number of internet users in the region grows, the more people will be exposed to extremist propaganda online.

The effects of ICT on ISIS' presence in Southeast Asia can be examined on two levels: first, new communication technologies have provided platforms for ISIS to spread its ideology within the region. The global network of Islamic jihadists can easily influence young Muslims via the internet. Thank to electronic media small, local extremist groups which



Source: Forum Islam al-Busyro, Jihadology, <http://jihadology.net>

were previously geographically isolated can now easily communicate with each other and receive inspiration from ISIS.

Online forums, blogs and websites are one of ISIS' main platforms for propaganda in the region. These online materials, though in Arabic or Malay, offer their support to Islamic State and justify its violent acts by selectively quoting religious texts. Under this framework, ISIS' enemies are all referred as infidels (كافر) and their own terrorist recruits as

holy warriors . The contents of the jihadist websites usually focus on Muslim communities (أمة) under attack, urging their religious brothers (الإخوان) to help them and to protect Islam at all costs. The jihadist websites also contain instructions for building weapons, such as bombs and improvised explosive devices.

Islam al-Busyro is an example of one these propaganda outlets. This Indonesian online forum distributes ISIS videos and provides tutorials and online discussion forums for its followers across the region. This blog is also connected to a twitter account which—though suspended for a while—has been reactivated and has announced a new associated Twitter account.

These social media accounts may be run directly by ISIS jihadists in Iraq and Syria or their sympathizers in Southeast Asia. Each of these accounts has thousands of followers which prove the appeal of ISIS in the region. Mohd Faris Anuar and Muhamad Wannady Muhammad Jedi, two Malaysians identified in an ISIS beheading video, are other examples of Southeast Asian involvement in ISIS' online presence. According to official reports, Muhamad Wannady's Facebook account which used to continuously publish ISIS propaganda has just recently been shut down by the Malaysian authorities.

ISIS has effectively grasped social media's potential to help establish a virtual presence in Southeast Asia. The videos and propaganda of ISIS on YouTube or other social media can go viral with the help of the their regional followers. These

videos are often edited with Hollywood style special effects to be more impressive. A few months ago a set of videos were uploaded by local IS sympathizers which showed off the Abdullah Azzam Academy, a jihadist training camp for Southeast Asian children in Syria. The academy was established for the children of ISIS' Southeast Asian fighters so that they can train the next generation of ISIS combatants. Via these kinds of videos, ISIS attempts to attract more Southeast Asians to their cause and to encourage their migration (هجرة) to their caliphate. Jasminder Singh, a researcher at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, stated: "[Recently] there has been a surge in Indonesian and Malaysian language material posted by ISIS online". According to official reports, ISIS has already succeeded in extending its influence to Southeast Asia through local radical groups. The idea of an in an Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia spanning Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, the southern Philippines, and southern Thailand is being widely propagated by these local e-jihadists.

Secondly, the internet has proved a potent recruiting tool for ISIS. While the internet has not completely replaced traditional methods of recruitment many experts believe that internet-based recruitment systems are growing rapidly. The decentralized nature of the Internet and the associated difficulty in curbing online propaganda and recruitment make it more appealing to terrorist activity. Many ISIS affiliated websites in Southeast Asia not only give advice to their followers on how to undertake terrorist activity in their own



countries but also go so far as to support them financially. Indonesian officials believe the 2002 terrorist bombings in Bali were financed through such an online source.

Recently Malaysian authorities arrested a group of extremists who used Facebook to recruit locals for ISIS.



Sebelum ini sudah dua orang rakyat Malaysia yang berjihad di Syria telah kembali ke rahmatullah dan yang terkini Ustaz Lotfi yang sedang berjihad Di Syria Kembali Ke Rahmatullah.

Blog Rasmi Briged Kibaran Bendera

Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the Malaysian Minister of Home Affairs, claimed that more than 70 percent of ISIS jihadists from Southeast Asia are recruited online. Indeed social media in Malaysia has not only become a primary tool for exposing Malaysians to ISIS ideology but it is also being used to pass along information to interested individuals on how to travel to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS.

Lotfi Ariffin, a former member of PAS (Malaysia Pan Islamic Party), was killed while fighting for ISIS in Syria—just one prominent example of a Malaysian involved in ISIS terrorist activities. He and his brother used to propagate jihadist activities on social media. On his Facebook page (which has more than 20,000 followers), Ariffin openly promoted IS ideology and sought to influence youth in the region. While his account has since been suspended many Facebook pages and blogs continue to follow the jihadist example he set. The Tribute Asyyahid Ustaz Lotfi Ariffin Facebook page and the Blog Rasmi Briged Kibaran Bendera are examples of such activities, the latter of which has more than 2 million followers and is linked to a similarly-inspired YouTube account.

Influenced by ISIS’ online presence, some Southeast Asian extremist groups have already pledged allegiance to the group. Furthermore, ISIS online activity has even inspired the establishment of new jihadist groups. Majmu’ah al-Arkhabiliy is one such new Indonesian-Malaysian terrorist group in Raqqa, Syria under the command of ISIS. It claims

over a hundred Malaysians and Indonesians as members of the unit.

Besides just recruiting fighters from Southeast Asia, dozens of local women have been encouraged to join the IS Caliphate in Iraq and Syria and to participate in Jihad Al Nikah, contributing to extremist activities through marrying combatants. These women are exposed to ISIS ideology via social networks until they decide to migrate to Syria. Before the rise of the Internet and social media, Southeast Asian authorities only had to control mosques and other religious gatherings, such as Friday prayers, to hinder Islamic extremism. New ICT and social media have heightened the challenge of dealing with radicalism and have amplified the threat.

## *2- Returning Jihadists*

In the 1980s, during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, over 700 Southeast Asian jihadists joined in the war. Upon their return some of these local jihadists formed their own terrorist groups including Jammah Islamyah and the Abu Sayyaf group. During the Afghan war, many Southeast Asian Muslims joined the mujahadeen and were influenced by Al Qaeda ideology; however, currently more than 1000 jihadists are fighting in Iraq and. Thus, ISIS is proving itself more organized and more sophisticated than Al-Qaeda and could pose a more serious threat than its predecessor.

Local jihadists who spent time with IS militants eventually return with their radical ideology and a new set of military capabilities. Upon their return, similar to those returning militants in the 1980s, they may pass their tactical skills and violent ideology on to local extremist groups and revive them.

Ansyaad Mbai, the head of Indonesia's National Counter-terrorism Agency, recently stated the main concern of Southeast Asian governments is returning fighters and what they will do upon their arrival back in the region.<sup>[6]</sup> These returning militants may help a new generation of jihadism to take root in their home countries and inspire a new generation of Muslim extremists. As an Indonesian expert stated: "They will return to their homes across the world, repeating what happened when fighters in Afghanistan returned. A new wave of international terrorism will likely recur."<sup>[7]</sup>

Hishammudin Hussein, the defense minister of Malaysia, recently announced his concern over the establishment of ISIS branches in Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia.<sup>[8]</sup> Some of these returning jihadists had been directly involved in ISIS terrorist activities in Syria and Iraq. Ahmad Tarmimi Maliki, a 26 year-old Malaysian who carried explosives to the ISIS headquarters in Iraq, is just one such example. He was Malaysia's first suicide bomber with known links to ISIS. He participated in a terrorist attack on Iraqi soldiers at their SWAT headquarters in Baghdad which caused more than 20 deaths. Details of the attack were published on

the ISIS website and Maliki was widely praised as Martyr (شهيد). [9] Zulkifli Binhir, also known as Marwan, Southeast Asia's top terror suspect, is another Malaysian who was killed in January 2015 by the Filipino security forces. He was the FBI's most wanted terrorist and a notorious bomb-maker for terrorist groups throughout the region. [10]

Some of the Malaysians and Indonesians known to have joined IS have been spotted in propaganda beheading videos. Malaysia officials believe these people are the members of Majmuah Arkhabiliy, a new joint Malaysian-Indonesian militant group within Islamic Caliphate territory. [11] In Indonesia, previously the base of dangerous terrorist groups such as Jammah Islamiyah (JI), many old and new jihadist groups have begun supporting ISIS and its ideology. In addition to JI, Jammah Anshurat Tauhid and Aktivis Syairiad Islam have already pledged their allegiance to ISIS. Recently Abu Bakar Bashir, a famous Indonesian Islamic extremist and the spiritual leader of Southeast Asia's extremist network, has beseeched his followers to support ISIS. [12]

According to official estimates, the number of Indonesians joining ISIS has soared from 56 in mid-2014 to over 110 by the end of the same year.

It seems ISIS ideology in Indonesia is even proving popular among scholars and journalists. Abu Shailah Attamarowi and M. Fachry are scholars who organized a gathering in Jakarta to pledge their support for ISIS. [13] A similar ceremony was organized by ISIS supporters in Solo Baru

in July 2014. The previous president of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, labeled ISIS as humiliating to Muslims and banned any support for this group. The current government of Indonesia maintained the ban on jihadist activities; however, ISIS ideology is still being widely propagated in Indonesia. General Tito Karnavian, Indonesia's National Police Inspector worried that ISIS is providing "oxygen" to local extremist groups. He added that those Indonesians who have joined ISIS will likely return home with sophisticated combat training and will spread their extremist ideologies to others. [14]

In its most recent report, IPAC (the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict) warned the Indonesian government and other regional leaders about ISIS hubs in the country and urged better monitoring of the movements of ISIS sympathizers. [15] To impede ISIS recruitment, Indonesia security services are keeping a close watch on extremist group and have even gone so far as to invalidate passports of local jihadists who have become ISIS members.

In the Philippines, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the Abu Sayyaf group have already declared their allegiance to ISIS. [16] A BIFF spokesman confirmed their alliance with Islamic State in a video uploaded to YouTube. Filipino forces are embroiled in a battle against Islamic extremism in the south of the country and even withstood a terrorist attack in January 2015 in which more than 44 counter-terrorist police commandos were killed in a bombing by Abdul Basil Usman. [17] According to



official reports, ISIS has also gained ground among radicalized Muslims in Mindanao; however, there remains no official consensus among Filipino rebel and terrorist groups. While some of them such as Abu Sayyaf and BIFF have already pledged allegiance to ISIS, MILF and MNLF which feature a more nationalistic identity have condemned ISIS and vowed to halt the dangerous virus of extremism in the region.

### *3- The world wide Caliphate*

In July of 2014, Abu Bakar Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, declared the establishment of a worldwide caliphate. In his statement Baghdadi summoned Muslims across the globe to join IS. He stated, “[y]our brothers all over the world are waiting for your rescue, and are anticipating your brigades.”<sup>[18]</sup> The heart of Islamic State’s doctrine is a belief in the apocalypse and the fulfillment of the prophecy according to the Qur’an. According to the religious narratives of the hadith, particularly those contributed to the Prophet Mohammad, the final apocalyptic battle will take place between Muslims and infidels. On the day of judgment, which is said will take place in Syria, Muslims’ savior, the Mahdi, and Jesus Christ will appear together and summon their Muslim army against the infidels (*kafir*). According to the prophecy, on that day all people have to convert to Islam otherwise they will be considered enemies. The Qur’an states that the victory of Muslims is inevitable. While there are a

wide variety of prophecies in Islamic texts, ISIS has mainly focused on the Dabiq hadith which is attributed to Mohammad. The prophecy says, “The last hour would not come until the Romans would land at Al-Amaq (Dabiq).” Dabiq, a small city in Syria, is the location of the apocalyptic final battle where the Romans will land and, after a bloody battle, suffer defeat at the hands of the Muslim army. In order to draw a parallel between the Dabiq prophecy and their own campaigns, IS jihadists captured Dabiq in a showy effort to prepare the scene for judgment day. Dabiq is only a small town of little strategic importance; however, the location holds great value as a propaganda tool as after its capture, IS supporters all around the world tweeted photos of the city with quotes from the hadith.

Whether ISIS terrorists really believe this prophecy or whether it is just a part of their strategy, apocalypticism is feeding their ideology and justifying their violent acts.

ISIS even releases a magazine named Dabiq. Besides being a news platform, the magazine expounds the agenda of the Islamic Caliphate and seeks to justify ISIS’s violent strategies. The third issue of the magazine “The Call to Hijrah” encourages all Muslims across the globe to migrate (هِجْرَة) to the Islamic Caliphate and to participate in the holy war as a precursor to the final apocalyptic battle. One of the articles in this issue, “Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity,” elaborates on the concept of a worldwide caliphate in the context of religious migration (هِجْرَة). Referring to the Qur’an

and the hadith (أحاديث), Muslims today are being portrayed as hopeless people who would dream of *hijrat* (migration) from the lands of infidels to the lands of jihad. The writer continues on that the caliphate is an Islamic utopia which accepts all Muslims regardless of their nationality and does all it can to protect them. According to the article, religious migration is an obligation for today's Muslims, especially after the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate.

Back-page photo of the fourth issue of this magazine shows Southeast Asians who have already joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq to fulfill their religious obligation.

Therefore the fast growing appeal of ISIS in Southeast Asia can be explained within the framework of the prophecy. Considering Southeast Asian Muslims' strong commitment to Islamic beliefs and practices and the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate as a symbol of a supposedly unfolding prophecy, ISIS has the potential to wage a substantive campaign to charm Muslims in the region. ISIS has been actively attempting to luring Southeast Asia's current generation of young Muslims to join their terrorist group. From the viewpoint of the small segment of suppressed and marginalized Muslims in Southeast Asia, Islamic State (IS) is the prophesized caliphate of the Mahdi and a utopia in which to experience true Islamic government. One significant example pertaining to ISIS' appeal in Southeast Asia is the formation of the Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyyah (The Malay Archipelago Unit of the Islamic State). This unit was established by Malaysian and Indonesian jihadists who



Allah's Messenger (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam) said, "You will have a treaty of security with the Romans until you both fight an enemy beyond them. And you will be victorious, you will gain war booty, and you will achieve such without losses. Thereafter you will return until you lodge at a pastureland full of rocky mounds. A man from the Roman Christians will then raise the cross. He will say, 'The cross has prevailed!' A man from the Muslims will then say, 'Rather Allah has prevailed,' and then he will angrily rise and crush the cross which is not at a distance from him. Then the Romans will betray the treaty by rising against the breaker of the cross and striking his neck. The Muslims will then rise and rush to their arms. They will then battle. Allah will bless this party of Muslims with shahādah. The Romans will say to the Roman leader, 'We are sufficient for you against the Arabs.' They will then gather for the *Malhamah* (the grand battle before the Hour). They will come for you under eighty banners, with each banner there will be twelve thousand people"

[Sahih: reported by Imām Ahmad, Abū Dāwūd, Ibn Mājah, and Ibn Hibbān on the authority of Dhī Māshmar].

The back-page photo of Dabiq magazine, issue 4

have joined IS. The formation of this group inside the territory of Islamic State has raised serious security concerns that these fighters may pass along ISIS ideology to sleeping terrorist cells in the region and help to revive them upon their return to their home countries. According to the official reports, currently four new extremist groups have been formed in Malaysia. It is believed that these new jihadist groups are an outgrowth of the older radical groups in the region and they seek to establish an Islamic Caliphate in Southeast Asia.

## Conclusion

The governments of the region are completely aware that the threat of ISIS is not confined to the Middle East and merits their attention and correspondingly serious measures to quell it. Learning from their past experience fighting against Al-Qaeda, Southeast Asian leaders consider terrorism as a long term security concern as well as a regional threat. They are highly concerned about the number of local jihadists in Iraq and Syria and what they will do upon their return home. To combat against this new wave of terrorism Southeast Asian governments have done a lot to curb the influence of ISIS in the region. They have taken serious measures to impede ISIS recruitment and have coordinated their counter terrorism activities.

Counter ISIS measures in Southeast Asia could be implemented at different levels.

At the national level, Indonesia's government has encouraged moderate Muslim leaders to speak out and condemn ISIS. The government has also banned all types of propaganda supporting or sympathizing with ISIS, including YouTube videos. Malaysia, another Muslim-majority country in the region, has publicly condemned the violent acts of this terrorist group. The Malaysian police are monitoring social media to identify and arrest people suspected of terrorist activities. The Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yasin, recently stated that strong measures like the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Pota) are needed to curb the threat of terrorism and radicalism in the country.[\[19\]](#)

While Singapore is not a Muslim-majority country, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) have been contributing military assets to combat terrorism in the region. However, Singapore's defense minister has announced that none of its combat troops will be sent to Iraq and Syria. To develop of national counter-terrorism strategy, countries must consider that the seeds of radicalism can only grow in fertile soil. Many Southeast Asian Muslims are motivated to engage in jihad due to the internal problems of their home countries just as much—if not more than—external pull factors. The perpetual cycle of poverty, corruption, injustice, lack of democracy, and religious and ethnic discrimination can provide exactly the fertile soil needed for ISIS to takes root in the region. The strengthening of democracy and civil society along with political reform and greater governmental transparency could



prove the region's most powerful weapons against ISIS' dangerous, extremist message.

Supporting civil and moderate interpretations of Islam should be another priority of Southeast Asian governments in order to counter the influence of the radical ideology of ISIS.

At the regional level, ASEAN has begun taking effective steps towards implementing counter-terrorism strategies to combat ISIS. At ASEAN's 25<sup>th</sup> annual summit in Burma, member states expressed their concerns and commitment to fight ISIS as a new regional threat. ASEAN has also expanded its cooperation with other countries to strengthen local counter-terrorism capabilities. ASEAN plus Japan issued a declaration to improve their regional cooperation against terrorism. Attacking the ideologies at the root of terrorism, strengthening border and immigration controls, and conducting joint training programs are critical achievements of this major step forward.

At the regional level, counter-terrorism cooperation should be boosted through stronger information sharing on returning jihadists. Monitoring suspected social media activities and enhancing cyber security measures could also help to blunt ISIS' online presence. Finally, it must be stated that reducing the threat IS poses to Southeast Asia without addressing the internal factors which could foster its rise will be impossible. IS' appeal in Southeast Asia derives from the region's many internal problems including frustration, repression, corruption, religious and cultural extinction,

marginalization, fragile democratic systems, and a lack of a strong civil society. The convergence of these catalysts with IS appealingly apocalyptic ideology are the two strongest factors driving the desire of Southeast Asian Muslims to join the Islamic caliphate.